

The Divine Therapist: A Reflection on Prayer and Hope

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Yesterday, I taught a class for an online adult learning program called Laasok, which is run by my colleague and friend Rabbi Micah Streiffer out of Toronto.

Among the many Zoom courses he offers is a weekly Thursday lunchtime class about hope. He launched it in the aftermath of October 7, recognizing the spiritual need we all have for hope in a world which is all too often filled with despair.

(Some of our TBE congregants are participating in the class. If you enjoy adult learning, I encourage you to check it out [here](#).)

Each week, Rabbi Streiffer asks the guest teacher to choose a text from the Jewish tradition about hope and lead a discussion about it. The text I chose was Psalm 51.

It's a meditation King David wrote while he was experiencing a personal spiritual crisis, after the prophet Nathan came to rebuke him for his grossly immoral conduct regarding Batsheva and her husband.¹

Many of us are familiar with this story, if only from the couple lines Leonard Cohen wrote about it in "Halleluyah": "Your faith was strong, but you needed proof / You saw her bathing on the roof / Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew ya."

Enticed by this mysterious woman, King David sent his men to find out who she was. They reported back to him that she was married, but David wasn't content to let it go.

Ever the charmer, David struck up an affair with her and got her pregnant. Now he had a problem. But he devised a terrible scheme to fix it.

Having learned that Batsheva's husband, Uriah, was a soldier in David's army, he ordered Uriah to be sent to fight on the front lines. And, worse, he ordered his general to intentionally pull the rest of the troops back so that Uriah would be killed. Which he was.

Now that Uriah was out of the way, it meant David could marry Batsheva—which he did. Talk about abuse of power!

But lest David think all's well that ends well, the prophet Nathan came by one day to tell David he was in big trouble with God for what he'd done.

His treachery now exposed, David was forlorn and pleaded with God to forgive him.

He writes in Psalm 51:

"Have mercy upon me, O God,
as befits Your faithfulness;
in keeping with Your abundant compassion,
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity,
and purify me of my sin;

for I recognize my transgressions,
and am ever conscious of my sin.
Against You alone have I sinned,
and done what is evil in Your sight;
so You are just in Your sentence,
and right in Your judgment.”²

Whoa, wait just a minute! Did David say, “Against *You alone* have I sinned”?

The students in my class did *not* like that. How could David not even mention Uriah or Batsheva? Didn’t he sin against them, too—actually, even more directly than against God?

It’s a good question. And it prompted a good conversation.

Our parashah this week is one of those most people dread: Spring is here, you say? That means we get to read about leprosy, right? Yay!

And here it is: “Adonai spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: When a person has on the skin of the body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests. The priest shall examine the affection on the skin of the body: if hair in the affected patch has turned white and the affection appears to be deeper than the skin of the body, it is a leprous affection; when the priest sees it, he shall pronounce the person impure.” (Lev. 13:1-3)

Seriously? I’m a rabbi, not a dermatologist. I really have to come up with something to say about this every year?

Anyway...

My friend Rabbi Streiffer pointed me to a midrash³, which asks the obvious question: When someone gets a skin infection, why do they have to show it to the priest?

The answer: Because you can’t diagnose yourself.

And a family member can’t diagnose you either.

Why not? After all, no one knows you better than yourself and your spouse or your sibling or your child or your parent, right?

Or maybe not.

Maybe the Torah is pointing here to a fundamental truth about human nature: that there are some things about us that neither we, nor those closest to us, can see.

And if that’s true of a skin condition, it’s true all the more so when it comes to our spiritual condition.

After David's egregious wrongdoing is exposed and he says to God, "I recognize my transgressions. ...Against You alone have I sinned," I don't think David is being disingenuous. He's not lying and he's not trying to pull a fast one over on God.

I think he's being sincere about how he perceives his own actions. He's just not capable of seeing the full picture on his own. As clear as it is to us, David doesn't have the ability to acknowledge the extent of his transgression or the ramifications of his actions for the others involved.

It's not because he's dense or self-centered or arrogant. In fact, from his words in the psalm, it seems to me that he's approaching God in genuine contrition and humility.

I just think he can't do it on his own. He needs help—emotional help, spiritual help, to transcend his own limitations and expand his perspective. And David is wise enough to know that, just as the leper needs to go to the priest, he needs to go to God.

Why God? Because God knows everything there is to know about us.

As David himself says in another one of his psalms:

"Adonai, You have examined me and know me.
When I sit down or stand up You know it;
You discern my thoughts from afar.
You observe my walking and reclining,
and are familiar with all my ways.
There is not a word on my tongue
but that You, Adonai, know it well. ...

[I can't hide from You. Wherever I go,]
"even there Your hand will be guiding me,
Your right hand will be holding me fast."⁴

You've probably heard me say that I think of God as being like the best friend you could possibly have.

In addition to "friend," I'd like to suggest another metaphor that I think describes what God can be for us: "therapist."

I say that because of the midrash: You can't diagnose yourself because your vision is blocked and partial; and you can't expect a family member to diagnose you because they've got an emotional stake in you, which biases their perspective and leads them to judge you, either too favorably or too harshly.

By contrast, a therapist is someone who has no emotional stake in your life. And that's good, because it enables them to listen openly and patiently without judgment, offer objective guidance, critique you when you need to be critiqued, support you when you need to be supported, and push you when you need to be pushed.

Sometimes, I think of God in the same way.

God loves every one of us intimately and unconditionally, of course. And it's precisely for that reason that God can shine a light on who we truly are, in our entirety—the good and the bad—and help us see what we can't see on our own.

In the safety of our conversations with God, the Divine Therapist, we can lay everything out there, and share things we would never share with anyone, and confront the darkest things about ourselves. And it's incredibly helpful because, truthfully, that's the only way to heal and grow.

Thus David's plea:

"Examine me, O God, and know my mind;
probe me and know my thoughts.
See if I have vexatious ways,
and guide me in ways everlasting."⁵

As the mighty King David humbles himself before God in the aftermath of the Batsheva affair, he makes a request that would become so familiar to all of us:

"*Adonai s'fatai tiftach, u-fi yagid t'hillatekha*—Adonai, open up my lips, that my mouth may declare your praise."⁶

In the view of Rabbi David Kimchi, a medieval Torah commentator, the divine spirit has departed from David altogether. He's lost his inspiration. As he becomes more aware of what he's done, he finds that he's unable to express himself adequately. So, he asks God for help to process his feelings and his actions and to find the words to express himself.

I think this is why the sages chose this line from Psalm 51 as the prologue to our Amidah prayer:

To remind us that we are all flawed; that even if we haven't sent a guy to be killed so we could steal his wife, we've all done things we're ashamed of, things we can't share with anyone, and yet, things we need to confront if we're going to attain greater spiritual well-being. ...

And *this* is exactly why we pray.

As Rav Soloveitchik writes, "Out of the depths in which the individual finds himself, one calls upon God in seclusion and loneliness." Prayer is "a process of growth in the experience of crisis."⁷

And in that way, it can be an amazing source of hope.

1 // *Samuel* 11-12

2 Psalm 51:3-6

3 See *Sifra*, *Tazria Nega'im* 1:9-10; also, *Mishnah*, *Nega'im* 3:1

4 Psalm 139:1-4, 10

5 Psalm 139:23-24

6 Psalm 51:17

7 Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, 35